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ABSTRACT

Six methods by which the departmental chairperson can improve instruction are presented. The first method is improving instruction by example. The chairman can sponsor discussions at faculty meetings designed to explore what comprises good teaching and identify members of his/her staff to serve as models. A second method of improving instruction is through the encouragement and support of research; e.g., providing released time and/or additional support staff. The use of educational technology, such as videotape to demonstrate class interaction with teaching staff, is a third method of instructional improvement, and a fourth way involves personal visits to the classroom. A fifth method of improving instruction is the use of released time, which allows faculty time to devise new materials and methods of instruction or to undertake research on the teaching/learning process. The final method for improving instruction is through the creation of a departmental atmosphere conducive to improving instruction. (PHR)

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THE DEPARTMENT CHAIRPERSON AS INSTRUCTIONAL CATALYST

Edward J. Jennerich, Ph.D.

The academic department chairperson is in the most pivotal of all positions concerned with instructional development. It is the chairperson who has been delegated the prime responsibility for departmental operations by the university administration. The department chairperson is the one individual in the entire instructional process who is most directly involved with students and faculty on a day to day basis. It is the chairperson who sets the tone of the department and to whom faculty and students look for leadership, guidance, and support. In addition, the chairperson generally exerts a great deal of influence, if not total control, over the reward structure of the department. It is the chairperson, then, who can either "make or break" all attempts at instructional improvement by controlling the types of professional activities which are rewarded by salary raises, tenure, etc.

With this perspective in mind, the author explores six strategies by which the academic department chairperson can become a positive catalytic agent for improving instruction. These strategies include improving instruction by: example; encouragement and support of research; using educational technology; classroom visitation; released time; and departmental atmosphere.

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THE DEPARTMENT CHAIRPERSON AS INSTRUCTIONAL CATALYST

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The academic department chairperson is one of the most important, if not the most important, individuals within higher education. The position of "department chairperson" is not a new one. Indeed, there is evidence that the position can trace its' roots as far back in time as 1213 at the University of Paris (Rashdall 1936, 1, p. 324). Yet throughout the history of higher education department chairpersons have exerted little influence or control over their respective departments and it has only been quite recently that department chairpersons have begun to make any significant impact upon the course of higher education. This lack of import was due to the small size of most institutions of higher learning and the direct control exerted by presidents and deans in day to day operations. However, the rapid growth of higher education within the last one hundred years has altered the organizational structure of most colleges and universities.

As institutions of higher education became larger and more complex, it became impossible for presidents, and later deans, to have direct control over the day to day operations of every department. Responsibility for departmental operations was delegated, therefore, to the department chairpersons. This decentralization placed department chairpersons in the new and crucial role of first line administrator with immediate responsibility for administrative, personnel, and instructional affairs.

Due to the nature of these proceedings, we cannot cover the entire spectrum of the departmental chairpersons role in higher education. However, it is possible to focus on one of those roles, (and I believe it to be the most important

role) - the department chairperson as instructional catalyst. The department chairperson is the one individual in the entire instructional process who is most directly involved with students and faculty on a day to day basis. It is the chairperson who establishes the environment of the department and to whom faculty and students look for leadership, guidance and support. It is the chairperson who initiates the reward structure of the department. It is the chairperson, then, who can either insure the success or failure of any attempts at instructional improvement by setting the tone of the department, by controlling the reward structure within the department and by creating the proper stimuli for instructional improvement.

Realizing the enormous potential for influencing instructional improvement which rests with the department chairperson, it is surprising that more attention has not been given to this significant component of the teaching-learning process. The remaining portion of this paper will attempt to fill a portion of the void that exists by presenting specific methods by which department chairpersons can exert a positive influence on instructional improvement.

Improving Instruction By Example: This is perhaps the most obvious and most difficult method by which a department chairperson can serve as an instructional catalyst. There are two major obstacles to be overcome: 1) what is "good" or "effective" teaching, and 2) what guarantees are there that because an individual is a chairperson that they exhibit those qualities of "good" or "effective" teaching?

The first question concerning what is "good" or "effective" could be the foundation upon which a program of instructional development could be built. A series of discussions at faculty meetings designed to raise such questions could create a forum for discussion as well as faculty reflection upon how they teach and why they teach the way they do. Since there is no one way to teach, this

type of a discussion could serve to present a variety of teaching strategies as well as create a dialogue on the subject of teaching - a topic of conversation often lacking in many departments.

The second question concerning the chairperson as model is difficult to answer. There is, of course, no guarantee that the chairperson will even be interested in instructional improvement, let alone serve as a model. However, for the purposes of our discussion let us assume the chairperson is indeed interested in instructional improvement. The chairperson, in order to avoid the stigma of being branded a tyrant or being omnipotent, would be wise to find another member or preferably members of the department who exhibits those qualities of "good" or "effective" teaching and let them serve as models for their colleagues. This serves the dual function of being non-threatening and self-motivating. In addition, those who exhibit the characteristics of "good" and "effective" teaching, according to whatever criteria is established, should be rewarded for their performance.

In addition to identifying models within the department itself, individuals from other departments on campus who have achieved recognition as outstanding teachers could also be used as models, as could individuals from other institutions who would be willing to serve as resource people or models. The chairperson could further aid such activity by organizing a one or two-day retreat off campus for the purpose of discussing the teaching-learning process and also by providing travel funds to conferences which are concerned with ways to improve teaching.

Improving Instruction By the Encouragement and Support of Research: Most research undertaken by faculty is content-related and generally of narrow interest. The chairperson could serve as a catalyst by encouraging research centered upon the process of teaching in that particular discipline. This would be a

natural progression from the discussion of the teaching process outlined in the preceeding section. Such topics as "What information is currently available concerning teaching in my discipline?"; "What is being done in other disciplines that relates to and could be adapted by my discipline?"; "What can I contribute to the body of knowledge concerning teaching in my discipline?" could serve as the basis for important research.

Investigations such as these could easily be encouraged by the chairperson and supported in a variety of ways. For example, the chairperson could provide released time for faculty members from one or two courses for a semester; a faculty member could be released from all committee assignments for a given period of time; a short-term sabbatical could be provided; an additional graduate student might be assigned to aid the faculty member; secretarial help could be provided, and; overt recognition by the chairperson that pedagogical research is valid, necessary, on an equal footing with discipline-related research, and may be undertaken without loss of status or prestige.

Improving Instruction By Using Educational Technology:* The use of educational technology to improve instruction can be viewed from two perspectives. On the one hand, using educational technology as a device to evaluate one's performance and, on the other hand, as a classroom teaching device.

From the perspective of serving as an evaluator of one's performance, educational technology is a frequently over-looked avenue of self improvement. Perhaps the single most effective type of educational technology is video tape. By video taping one's teaching, a faculty member can get a most revealing

*"Educational technology is a complex, integrated process involving people, procedures, ideas, devices and organization, for analyzing problems, and devising, implementing, evaluating and managing solutions to those problems..." (AECT Task Force on Definition and Terminology, p. 164).

look at how others view him. This can serve as a positive stimulus and clearly demonstrate what, if anything, in one's classroom performance needs improvement. A similar and even more effective technique is to use two video tape cameras--one focusing on the instructor and one on the class. When played back simultaneously, the interaction between the instructor and the class is clearly revealed. Another approach might be to establish micro-teaching centers within the department involving real or simulated situations, using small groups of students, which are video taped and evaluated along established criteria by the instructor and an "expert".

The second use which can be made of educational technology is as an integral component of classroom instruction. The variety of materials (software) and machines (hardware) is often baffling to faculty who are not accustomed to using them. The chairperson could provide the incentive to conduct workshops on how to use the various pieces of equipment and, more importantly, what type of equipment is best suited to one's instructional objectives i.e., programmed instruction, slides, tape, video tape, etc.

The chairperson can encourage innovation and experimentation using educational technology but in order to do so expensive equipment is often required. The chairperson plays a pivotal role here in securing the necessary funds from higher level administration or from sources outside the institution. The chairperson is also in the crucial position in providing space for such equipment, for arranging workshops, for securing areas for micro-teaching or independent study, and the always present encouragement of such activities.

Improving Instruction By Classroom Visitation: Visiting or observing in a colleague's classroom is one of the sacred cows of the professoriate. We often know a great deal about a colleague's research but we often know very little about the other half of the teaching/research dualism of professional responsibility--teaching. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to classroom visitations is

that such visits are generally viewed as being evaluative in nature and related to one's continued employment. While this is certainly a valid reason to visit a faculty members classroom, it is most certainly not the only reason. Peers could be invited to sit in on a class by the instructor for the purpose of providing points of discussion concerning the teaching process, or to see how others are teaching the same course, or to see in actual use different teaching strategies, or for all of the above reasons. If visits by peers are not popular, similar results could be achieved by having peers view a classroom video tape and discussing it with the instructor.

Visits or video tape viewings could also be made by the chairperson for the purpose of evaluating faculty performance. If faculty members are to be evaluated and promoted, in part, for their teaching performance, it seems that such visits would not only be timely, but absolutely necessary to insure quality instruction within the department. The key element, is, of course, the approach taken by the chairperson which should be one of providing constructive feedback to the instructor. If, after several attempts to improve, a faculty member's teaching performance is still unsatisfactory, it becomes incumbent upon the chairperson to be aware of the situation and to take appropriate action.

Improving Instruction Through Released Time: While the subject of released time has been suggested above, it is important enough to deserve additional consideration. It is through released time that the department chairperson can provide the most direct influence over instructional improvement and innovation. Often the lack of time rather than interest is the major obstacle to faculty desirous of trying new approaches to teaching. The chairperson can aid the faculty by equitable scheduling of teaching loads and even distribution of heavy student loads. The chairperson can also provide interested faculty with released time from committee assignments or from one or two classes in order

to develop materials, devise new methodologies of instruction, or to undertake research on the teaching-learning process. With the support of higher level administration, sabbaticals of a short or long-term nature could be implemented. Any such released time, however, can only be secured with the consent and support of the chairperson.

Improving Instruction Through Departmental Atmosphere: Departmental innovation or stagnation rests with the department chairperson. Without the active support and encouragement of the chairperson, none of the above strategies for instructional improvement nor any presented by my colleagues at this conference would be possible. The personal and professional attitudes of the chairperson with regard to curricular innovation or innovative teaching strategies permeates the departmental system through the departmental reward structure, i.e., that which is viewed as necessary and important is that which is rewarded.

It is incumbent, then, upon the chairperson to create a departmental environment conducive to improving instruction. This environment should be one in which quality instruction is viewed as a worthwhile endeavor and of equal importance to research; where new ideas and instructional strategies are given the opportunity to develop; where one is encouraged and aided by colleagues to reach the highest levels of professional competence; and, where one has the freedom to find the style of teaching best suited to himself and his students. As part of this environment, the chairperson must also develop a relationship of mutual trust and respect, wherein the necessary functions of supervision are those of constructive evaluation rather than tyranny. Finally, the chairperson can influence the department environment by providing adequate financial support for instructional innovation and improvement, either from institutional revenues or external funding agencies.

We can see from the above strategies for instructional improvement that department chairpersons play an extremely important and pivotal part in any attempts at improving instruction within their respective departments. Which strategy or combinations of strategies are used depends upon the mix of personalities and instructional philosophies present within the department. In any event, in the vast majority of departments, it will be the department chairperson who needs to take the initiative -- to become the instructional catalyst. But, while catalysts by definition are often not involved in the reactions created by their presence, the department chairperson should be an active participant and open to a variety of teaching-learning strategies as well as providing the leadership necessary for their implementation. While this serves to improve instruction among departmental members, it also serves to improve the instructional skills of the department chairperson as well.

It is appropriate, by way of conclusion, to state my sincere conviction that good departments are made, not born. It has been my experience that few good departments exist without good chairpersons. If we are to pay more than lip service to the importance of the teaching-learning process, then more serious attention than has previously been given to the role of the department chairperson in this process is in order. The ideas presented in this paper can serve as a nucleus from which other ideas can be generated and further research conducted. It is hoped that such will be the case. To ignore the crucial role of the department chairperson further, is to condemn any meaningful attempts at instructional improvement to failure.

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